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# Indigenous Archaeology: Historical Interpretation from an Emic Perspective

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Abstract: *This inquiry explores indigenous archaeology as a form of resistance to dominant Western science. Literature was identified and analyzed pertaining to the success of indigenous archaeology in the United States, British Columbia, and Australia. It is argued that a more inclusive archaeology is necessary, one that encourages partnerships with Indigenous groups in the interpretation of their own past. This study has implications for how we perceive Indigenous peoples from an archaeological perspective.*

## Introduction

Smith and Jackson remind us of the contextual nature of interpretation as well as the importance of the past:

> The shards of the past insinuate themselves into what we see, and don't see, value, and don't value, subtly informing every gaze, every movement, every decision. The privileges we enjoy, or don't enjoy, the inequities we fail to notice, or rail against, are the individual legacies of our shared pasts. Thus a proper acknowledgment of history is basic to an understanding of the present circumstances of our societies. If we are to create a better future, the past has to be embraced, in both its accomplishments and its failures. [2006:311]

The archaeological record can be measured, observed, and analyzed through a wide range of methods and approaches all of which contain a subjective component. As in all scientific endeavors, understanding the past remains a highly interpretive process, which varies according to the perspectives of researchers and is framed by their disciplinary orientations and often-conflicting sociohistorical perspectives. Interpreting the archaeological record and cultures of the past is a challenging and often-contentious undertaking for archaeologists and their interpretations may not always be consistent with those held by Indigenous peoples. This raises the question of whose views or interpretations better represent the archaeological record; those of the

archaeologist or those held by Indigenous peoples regarding their past. Archaeology, representing the "scientific" approach formalized in academia and backed by canons often derived from the natural sciences, has made claims of truth and validity in understanding the past, but these views have increasingly come under attack.

According to Brumfiel (2003), material remains are a source of power and those who control these material remains have the ability to interpret the past and to speak about it authoritatively. There is an embedded division of power left over from colonialism, which archaeologists often do not realize or acknowledge. This paper will examine indigenous archaeology as a form of resistance to dominant Western science and use several historically well-studied geographical regions (United States, British Columbia, and Australia) as an example of its success. Examples gleaned from the literature of indigenous archaeology will be used to assess how this approach can further our interpretations of the archaeology of Native American groups and other Indigenous groups cross-culturally.

## Who are Indigenous peoples?

Indigenous peoples are found in at least seventy countries around the world and are estimated to account for at least six percent of the world's population, numbering between 300 and 350 million individuals (Hitchcock 1994). Indigenous peoples can be defined as "groups traditionally regarded, and self-defined, as descendants of the original inhabitants of lands with which they share a strong spiritual bond" (Wiessner 1999:60). A more complex and potentially more informative definition comes from the International Labor Organization, a specialized agency within the United Nations. This two-part definition begins with "tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws" (Watkins 2005:430). The second part defines them as "peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions" (Watkins 2005:430). Watkins argues that Indigenous peoples are generally lumped into a category that identifies their relationship with the dominant government that controls the land they live upon.

In defining this term it cannot be overemphasized that Indigenous peoples do not constitute a single, monolithic cultural or ethnic group. Indigenous peoples are not homogeneous; each individual group maintains unique cultural characteristics and histories (Ferguson 1996). Indigenous groups living within different nations often have different experiences, lifestyles, and beliefs; the same can be said for groups living within the same nation.

Defining indigenous peoples has been a difficult task for states as well as international law makers. However descriptive the definitions may be, they remain limiting and under-inclusive, bringing about an abundance of questions. Some of these questions include:

> Who should be considered indigenous? Must an individual be of full indigenous ancestry to be a member of the group? How do we determine indigenous ancestry: by Western cultural standards or by the indigenous group's standards? How do we know a particular group is indigenous to a region? Similarly, how does the group itself know? How long must a community have been established in an area to be considered the original inhabitants? How does an indigenous group delineate its territorial boundaries? How should a state delineate these boundaries? [Vuotto 2004:222]

And, perhaps most importantly, who gets to decide the answers and by what process?

The questions Vuotto discusses in turn raise questions about an Indigenous group's ability to determine their own identity. Something to pay close attention to in this situation is: how do *we* (i.e, the power holders*)* decide, determine, and know the identity of these people? The state, along with Western influence, takes a paternalistic role in decision-making for Indigenous peoples, defining who they are and what their rights should be. Often these decisions are based upon assumptions grounded in anthropological and archaeological literature; a lingering form of colonialism that first needs to be acknowledged in order to be remedied.

Similarly, lingering colonialism occurring within the field of archaeology needs to be recognized. Gosden (2001) reminds us that all archaeology is postcolonial, and while almost all colonies are now independent, in the political and intellectual sense they are only partly so. In archaeology, predominantly one side is heard and published (and this is the side that traditionally influences or dictates policy). An essential part of any group's identity is their past. Removing or ignoring indigenous interpretation of their culture's history removes any remaining power and further degrades or insults their cultural

beliefs. Groups should be allowed to create their own identity and be able to define themselves without reference to colonial interpretations.

## History of Archaeology and Indigenous Peoples

Archaeology attempts to understand human behavior through inferences drawn from material culture. While archaeology as a discipline has examined a plethora of different cultures, it has been built upon systems of Western knowledge and methodologies rooted in a strong history of colonialism. It was colonialism that shaped the discipline of anthropology and the study of the "other" (see Vidich and Lyman 2000, for an in-depth discussion and critique of this history in anthropology and sociology, and Bogdan and Biklen 2007 for a similar overview focusing on education). Anthropology has allowed Westerners to study other cultures and to interpret pasts that are not their own. Consequently, nineteenth century archaeological theory characterized Indigenous societies as relatively primitive in comparison with European civilizations. These so-called scientific findings were sometimes used to justify colonial and racist ends. According to Ferguson, "Native Americans were dehumanized and objectified when the remains of their ancestors were collected for craniology, which was undertaken to prove that Native Americans were racially inferior and naturally doomed to extinction" (1996:65). It was these ideas that influenced government policy and were used as scientific justification to relocate tribes, establish reservations, and carry out other detrimental acts.

According to Atalay (2006a), Indigenous groups globally have faced, as part of the colonial process, the theft, appropriation, and misrepresentation of their history, cultural heritage, and intellectual and cultural property. Prior to European colonization, Indigenous communities were able to act as stewards over their own cultural resources and history, being able to examine, remember, teach, learn, and protect their own heritage and identity. While almost all colonies are now independent, the infrastructures of oppression remain. Colonialism can still be seen in almost every aspect of life today, encompassing all academic disciplines, contemporary practices of archaeology included (Atalay 2006a).

Brumfiel explains, "for descendant communities, archaeology supplies access to objects that are important for cultural heritage. Material remains can physically demonstrate the links between the past and the present, demonstrating the authenticity of local people's ethnic identities" (2003:214). But it has been archaeologists and museums that have maintained responsibility for the artifacts and ancestral remains of Indigenous people. Although many Indigenous groups do not agree with this process, it is the view of the dominant culture, and therefore

remains hard to change. The consequences of colonialism and the marginalization of these groups is a reflection of sociopolitical hierarchy in which they remain at the bottom. While nothing can be done to remedy past atrocities that accompanied colonialism, archaeology and other disciplines can move forward towards a more reflexive approach, acknowledging the injustices and practices of the past as well as how current archaeology came to be. Atalay describes this idea in detail:

> The colonial past is not distinct from today's realities and practices, as the precedents that were set continue to define structures for heritage management practices and have powerful continuing implications for Indigenous peoples in North America and elsewhere precisely because they disrupted the self-determination and sovereignty of Indigenous populations with respect to their abilities to govern and practice their own traditional forms of cultural resource management. [2006b:282]

It is primarily the responsibility of archaeologists to acknowledge the history of their discipline in order to avoid previous mistakes, as well as to create a more encompassing approach with the goal of improving their relationships with Native groups and helping empower them in the proactive development, design, analysis, and interpretation of their own past.

Accounts of Indigenous peoples' past have historically been written and interpreted from an etic perspective. Western researchers found *their own* meaning from the data and wrote from *their own* viewpoint, creating *their own* interpretations about a dissimilar population. This interpretation was accepted as knowledge and taught to the general public. Given the long history of oppression and marginalization of Indigenous groups, it hardly comes as a surprise that Indigenous peoples would find such etic accounts unacceptable. Indigenous groups have different cultural beliefs, different perspectives on how material culture should be treated and used, different perspectives on burials and what should or should not be done to remains, different creation stories, different ontological and epistemological ideas, and different understandings of the past. Understandably, they have posed the question: What makes archaeological knowledge truth and indigenous knowledge belief?

## Theoretical Orientation or Worldview

To begin to answer this question, we must first explore theoretical perspectives driving the research enterprise. Each researcher brings

with them a worldview and previous experiences as well as their own philosophical and theoretical frameworks. Creswell believes, "good research requires making these assumptions, paradigms, and frameworks explicit in the writing of a study, and at a minimum, to be aware that they influence the conduct of inquiry" (2007:15). Ontological and epistemological views (along with others) have an important role in research and can dramatically influence the outcome of a study, because each view (and its attendant methodology) is considerably different and can hold profound implications for all aspects of the research process. As detailed in most texts that focus on the history and application of research methods, contemporary researchers can be generally classified as representing one of several worldviews (Neuman 2006, Bogdan and Biklen 2007, Creswell 2007, Merriam 2009), which vary in their fundamental assumptions and approaches to scientific explanation. At present, evaluating the various attributes of these contrasting methods of interpreting the past remains an ongoing debate.

Every researcher has an influential worldview, whether they acknowledge it or not. The recognition of this worldview becomes increasingly important in archaeology as w*e* are re-telling the past of *their* ancestors. This is not a job to be taken lightly. Why are the oral histories or knowledge of the past of Indigenous peoples not utilized? Because the ideas of what should be considered truth or fact are biased by the Western notion of science that pervades much of our culture's ideas about the past. Acknowledging this lingering colonialism, the discipline of archaeology has begun emerging from its more recent positivist underpinnings. Archaeological theory has taken a new direction towards more reflexive and interpretive approaches such as critical theory, postcolonial theory, and postmodernism in attempt to identify and weed out colonial habits of thought. For a number of reasons to be discussed below, I argue that contemporary theoretically repositioned interpretations such as the aforementioned are necessary in exploring and re-creating stories of the past.

## Indigenous Perspectives on Archaeology

Native groups have struggled to reclaim, tell, or protect their pasts. Archaeology has historically operated as if it exists apart from the people whose past it studies. According to Watkins, even contemporary "archaeologists continue to operate as if the body of science operating within the political structure of the dominant government is a harmless entity to non-dominant groups" (2005:432). Trigger similarly suggests, "archaeologists have turned from using their discipline to rationalize Euro-American prejudices against native people, as they did in the nineteenth century, to simply ignoring native people as an end of study

in themselves" (Watkins 2005:433). The number of archaeologists who acknowledge this past and are cognizant of the historical shortcomings of their field is increasing. Kehoe (1992) believes that the mutedness of one group should be regarded as the deafness of the dominant group. By removing the restraints of academic tradition and listening to these muted groups we are fighting for the recognition of human worth. Kehoe also boldly asserts that there is a "clear connection between the practice of mainstream anthropology and service to the dominant class" (1992:27) and that this has been amply, though far from exhaustively, demonstrated in Western states. Colonialism has a far-reaching impact on the vision of the past, an impact that may continue in effect long after colonial rule has been overthrown. According to Scham, "the clearest distinguishing factor in colonial disenfranchisement is the effective replacement of an indigenous past by a narrative that emphasizes the conquest culture" (2001:188).

With all of this being said, it is easy to understand why Indigenous groups may not have a positive opinion of archaeology. In a fitting quote, Ros Langford, a member of the Tasmania Aboriginal Community asserts:

> You seek to say that as scientists you have a right to obtain and study information of our culture. You seek to say that because you are Australians you have a right to study and explore our heritage because it is a heritage to be shared by all Australians, white and black. From our point of view we say you have come as invaders, you have tried to destroy our culture, you have built your fortunes upon the lands and bodies of our people and now having said sorry, want a share in picking out the bones of what you regard as a dead past. We say that it is our past, our culture and heritage, and forms part of our present life. As such it is ours to control and it is ours to share on our terms. [1983:2]

These are strong words and to ignore this viewpoint would be callous and stifling at best, reminiscent of the colonial thought that still lingers. In this discussion, we must remember that Indigenous peoples are not just helpless victims of colonization, but people who have found and who continue to find methods of resistance in order to retain their traditional ways of life and traditional knowledge. Atalay argues that one method of resistance is to actively change the field of archaeology (2006a). Today, examining history from an emic perspective is beginning to take hold.

## Indigenous Archaeology in the United States

In the United States, resistance to colonial practices in archaeology began in the 1960s when Native Americans began publicly voicing their criticisms (Atalay 2006b). It was this activism that caused archaeologists to critically examine their practices, allowing for the restructuring of their relationships with Native Americans (Ferguson 1996). Indigenous archaeology is a way to counter-discourse the colonial practices of the past to find a new approach that is with, for, and by Indigenous people.

Although in the United States, making ties and creating better relationships with Native Americans has long been a topic of discussion and a primary goal of some archaeologists, it was not until recently that such recommendations came to fruition. For example, in 1992, archaeologist Lynne Goldstein came to the conclusion that Native Americans should be encouraged to become archaeologists as well as physical anthropologists in order to make the perpetuation of racism by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people difficult, if not impossible. This is an excellent suggestion, but certain Native American principles view archaeology as opposed to traditional customs. As one colleague informed me, to be a Native American archaeologist could be considered an oxymoron, but is becoming increasingly more common as tribes attempt to gain control of their resources and their pasts (Albert LeBeau III, personal communication).

There is a history of legislation that the United States government has put forth in order to protect Native artifacts and remains as well as to establish better relationships with tribes. Changes in Indigenous rights occurred as a result of protesting and other forms of activism carried out by Native Americans in the 1960s. Later legislation included the: 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, 1979 Archaeological Resources and Protection Act (ARPA), 1990 National Museum of American Indians Act, 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) (Ferguson 1996, Weaver 1997). Whether these laws have been effective in practice is also a subject of ongoing debate.

One of these laws was tested in 1996 when the remains of Kennewick Man (popular nickname) were found. Some important studies were conducted on these remains, but Native Americans put a stop to the studies under NAGPRA law. A group of scientists then sued the government in order to conduct "in-depth scientific studies of the remains as a rare discovery of national and international significance that could shed considerable light on the origins of humanity in the Americas" (Bruning 2006:503). They were denied such a chance at the beginning of this case, but the lawsuit took a turn in 2002 and the court ruled in favor of the scientists. The case was appealed in 2004, but the

decision was upheld. Both courts relied upon ARPA rather than NAGPRA and argued that the government failed to prove the remains were those of a Native American. This decision continues to be debated and illustrates that laws are often ambiguous and their application can be manipulated and interpreted in different ways by different interest groups. If the remains are culturally unidentifiable, the law's utility becomes obscure, which appears to be what happened with Kennewick Man. Neither court analyzed scientific study rights under NAGPRA in any depth, but rather focused on Native American status and group affiliation. This is something that Bruning (2006) believes needs to be further examined due to the highly debated basis for studying human remains. Bruning concludes that NAGPRA is unclear. There will need to be clarification or modification governing the scientific study of human remains before NAGPRA can truly assist anyone in their position. This legal decision has fueled debates about NAGPRA's ability to help Native Americans control their cultural remains.

Improving the relationship between archaeologists and Native peoples is necessary and will be beneficial for both parties, but cases such as the Kennewick Man illustrate the significant disparity in worldview that creates this challenging task. Ferguson (1996) makes a good point when mentioning that Native Americans and archaeologists can be powerful allies in efforts to protect archaeological resources from looting or development. The difference is Native Americans are stewards of the archaeological record because it is an ancestral legacy to them and archaeologists are stewards because they want to protect the record as a source of scientific data.

Examining some of the political aspects of archaeology that have impacted Indigenous peoples, Watkins (2005) concludes that just because we do not always hear Indigenous people's opinions (regarding archaeology), does not mean that they are not there. Their opinions are being either ignored or muted. If Indigenous peoples are invited in as equal partners "they may shout at first, but perhaps, with time, we can all converse in normal tones" (Watkins 2005:441). The objective of including disenfranchised peoples into the presentation of *their own* pasts has not always been successful. Not all archaeologists are ready for the transition and some continue to grapple with the alternative archaeological theories that could facilitate partnerships (Scham 2001). It is possible for (non-Indigenous) archaeologists and Indigenous peoples to get along and work toward a common goal, but efforts in understanding must be made and some of our positivistic biases must be acknowledged.

## Indigenous Archaeology in British Columbia

The restrictive relationship between archaeologists and Indigenous peoples has often gone unrecognized, but this is beginning to change worldwide. This can be seen in British Columbia, Canada, which in recent times has been significantly influenced by First Nations as they seek to control and restore their own affairs (Nicholas 2006). There have been previous ordinances preserving graves and historic objects, but this was done to protect the cultural patrimony of the province rather than the cultural heritage of the First Nations. For example, in 1865 the Indian Graves Ordinance was implemented, later being incorporated into the Federal Indian Act of 1876. Later implemented were the Historic Objects Preservation Action of 1925, along with the 1960 Archaeological and Historic Sites Protection Act, and 1979 Heritage Conservation Act. Legislation has varied throughout the last century, being administered and then repealed or amended over time. While these laws have in many ways helped archaeologists, they have done little to benefit Indigenous groups. The province through the Archaeology and Registry Services Branch issued permits and First Nations were merely given the opportunity to comment within a time limit of thirty days (Nicholas 2006). There have been protocols implemented that require or encourage consultation with First Nations, but they have had mixed results. While the Canadian government has been putting forth effort, they have often fallen short of obtaining First Nations' approvals for excavations. Change has been gradual, but situations and relationships are improving (Nicholas 2006).

Consultation with Indigenous community members became a formal part of the archaeological permitting process as a result of Protocol Agreement with the Ministry of Forests in 1994, the Forest Practices Code in 1995, and the Heritage Conservation Act (revised) in 1996. These decisions were made while awaiting the final verdict and series of groundbreaking decisions including the *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* case in 1997. This case represented a defining moment in Canadian law respecting Aboriginal peoples. The first case filed was dismissed, but proceeded to the Supreme Court of Canada who ruled that First Nations' "rights may include entitlement to land; and that oral history must now be given independent weight in law" (Nicholas 2006:357). The decision indicated that the Canadian Confederation did not extinguish First Nation's rights in 1867 and asserted Aboriginal title to their lands, a title that encompassed jurisdiction and property rights.

The involvement of First Nations in archaeology projects has increased steadily and significantly since the 1980s. Some examples of this participation have been First Nations assisting in land claim cases, challenging development, or challenging resource extraction. In order to help their communities, there has also been an increase in Native

people pursuing post-secondary education and archaeologists have employed more Indigenous people on a regular basis (this is a requirement of some Native groups when working on their land) (Nicholas 2006).

Nicholas posits, "there is greater equity than ever before as First Nations governments, along with Indigenous archaeologists, become involved in policy creation and review or implementation" (2006:362). Nicholas and Hollowell (2007) argue that archaeologists need to take a more proactive role in working with descendent communities because these groups need to be recognized, and their traditional knowledge has a very important role in the development of a more meaningful and representative archaeology. After all, it should be acknowledged that it was their ancestors who created the record.

## Indigenous Archaeology in Australia

From the viewpoint of some Indigenous Australians, one of the most studied groups in the history of anthropology, much anthropological and archaeological research is viewed as merely a tool used for colonial exploitation. Langford argues, "since archaeology underwrote many of the stereotypes of colonialism, Indigenous peoples have a right to expect archaeologists to assist with the decolonization of archaeology" (1983:312). This is a considerable expectation, but one in which Australian archaeologists appear to be fulfilling. It can be difficult to reconcile Aboriginal perspectives within an archaeological research framework, but is something toward which archaeologists are working.

Indigenous archaeology in Australia can be used as a successful model for others to follow. It is not without imperfections, but a is good place to begin. Aboriginals have definitive authority over their lands, as well as their ideas and cultural material pertaining to these ideas. In order to do archaeology in Australia, archaeologists must have a positive relationship with the population with which they intend to work. This can affect the amount and quality of information that an archaeologist or any other researcher receives. Indigenous control should make for better relationships, because there will be less tension if people are allowed to control what traditionally belonged to them. This is not to say that there is consensus among the discipline. Not all archaeologists support indigenous control, and this remains a contentious issue worldwide.

### Obtaining Permission for Fieldwork

Australia has a legislative history similar to that of the U.S. and British Columbia. In 1976, under the Northern Territory Land Rights Act, researchers applied for permits through the governmental Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Thanks to the Aboriginal Land

Rights Act, Aboriginal people are now able to control researchers' access through the ownership of land and protection of rights. Archaeology in this context can provide an opportunity for Indigenous people to exercise control through granting permission and overseeing research. Today, permission for fieldwork in Aboriginal communities must be obtained directly from *their* groups and organizations, negotiating with many levels of *their* authority before even being considered. According to Smith and Jackson,

> Aboriginal permission is needed to permit and excavate Indigenous sites or conduct research on human remains that are still held in museums (though there are active repatriation programs in all major museums) and secret-sacred material held in museums can not be accessed, even by museum staff, without permission from Aboriginal elders. [2006:324]

This is similar to NAGPRA laws in the United States, but the Australian laws are more detailed and oriented towards indigenous rights rather than science.

Control of Funding

Funding is another area in which Indigenous peoples exert control. In Australia, the major funding institutions (Australian Research Council, the National Health and Medical Research Council, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) require informed consent, community support and ethical clearance before a project will be funded (AIATSIS 2005). Applicants must also provide proof of this community support to the funding body in order to be awarded grants or other aid. These actions allow for an Indigenous group to select who *they* want to work with, unlike the previous process of them being appointed as participants by researchers. This may be viewed as an inconvenience to some archaeologists, but can also be considered an important step toward cultural autonomy and indigenous control over their own past.

Control of Publications

Aboriginal people in Australia have obtained control over the publication of material concerning their culture, images included. There have been issues regarding publications that discuss secret or sacred information. Part of the life of an academic is publication, so researchers have often provided the general public with information regarding different aspects of cultures, details that are often private or of a sensitive nature to those studied. Indigenous peoples had no

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Indigenous groups does not have to be a difficult process and is not an unreasonable expense; Indigenous groups are helping the researcher, why not return the favor? This line of thinking is reshaping the discipline of archaeology for the better (Smith and Jackson 2006).

## Conclusion

This paper has taken a critical look at the history of archaeology, focusing on the study of Indigenous groups. A look back on the history of archaeology, now viewed as a tool by many to further the exploitation or oppression of Indigenous groups, has called for new emically-oriented approaches for exploring and interpreting the archaeological record. A brief examination of salient aspects of indigenous archaeology in the United States, British Columbia, and Australia points to the necessity of a more inclusive archaeology, one that helps to empower Indigenous groups in the proactive development, design, analysis, and interpretation of their own past. Indigenous people in Australia currently maintain the most control over their resources and the most control over their roles in research. It is due to this autonomy that relationships between archaeologists and Indigenous groups thrive in this area. While Indigenous archaeology in Australia is not perfect, it can be used a successful template for the rest of the world. It is hoped that ultimately, archaeologists and Indigenous peoples can work together productively in uncovering the shared past of peoples across cultures.

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